

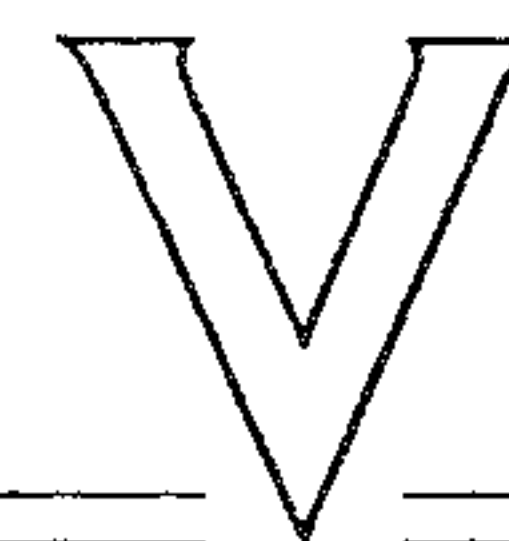
WRITING WITH POWER

**Techniques for Mastering
the Writing Process**

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FEEDBACK

INTRODUCTION

No matter how productively you managed to get words down on paper or how carefully you have revised, no matter how shrewdly you figured your audience and purpose and suited your words to them, there comes the time when you need feedback. Perhaps you need it for the sake of revising: you have a very important piece of writing and you need to find out which parts work and which parts don't so you can rewrite it carefully before giving it to the real audience. Or perhaps you have already given an important piece to the real audience—it's too late for any revising—but nevertheless you need to learn how your words worked on the reader. Or perhaps you've simply decided that you must start learning in general about the effectiveness of writing.

Some people don't need to be encouraged to seek feedback; indeed, they need to be restrained. To some of you, that is, I would like to say, "Stop worrying so much about how your words work, about how *good* they are; just keep your mind on your writing, have fun, get confident, write lots." In short, if you are a compulsive worrier and keep leaking your attention away from *what* you are doing to *how well* you are doing it, forget about feedback till you have done enough writing and sharing and feel more secure.

But some of you need to be encouraged to get feedback. Probably you have been burned in the past. Most people experience feedback as painful, however they get it. After all, getting feedback on an early draft usually means getting criticized before you've had

a chance to make your piece as good as you can make it. But getting feedback on a final draft feels even worse because you are usually getting criticized for your very best work, and besides, you are so tired of working on it by now that you can't even bear to look at it any more. If you follow the suggestions I give in this section, however, getting feedback can be a useful and gratifying experience.

It's easy to know when you should start getting feedback. Just keep in mind what's more important than what: writing is more important than sharing your writing with readers; and sharing your writing with readers is more important than getting feedback from them. That is, if sharing begins to stop you from writing, then don't share. And if getting feedback begins to stop you from writing or sharing, then stop getting feedback. Writing is what's most important. But when you can share and get feedback *without* hampering your writing, then you will benefit enormously from those two activities.

It may be that getting feedback has been hampering you more than it needs to. For if you use the approach suggested here you can avoid the most common problems in getting feedback: people beating around the bush and not telling you anything at all; or giving you a vague wholistic judgment such as "B-plus" or "I liked it"; or going into a negative gear and "critiquing" you by finding every single real and imaginable mistake there could be ("I hope I didn't discourage you or anything"); or else trying to imitate what they remember getting from their teachers and talking about nothing but "topic sentences"; or else grabbing it out of your hands and trying to rewrite the whole thing the way they think it ought to be; or else just telling you everything your writing reminds them of.

The four chapters of this section help you take charge of the feedback process by showing you the options you have and then providing you the tools you need.

- In Chapter 21, "Criterion-Based Feedback and Reader-Based Feedback," I explore the two kinds of feedback you can get and the particular strengths and weaknesses of each kind.

- Chapters 22 and 23 provide the tools you need for actually getting good feedback—specific questions to ask readers to help them find more useful and substantive things to tell you than "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." Chapter 22 is a catalogue of questions for getting criterion-based feedback, 23 a catalogue of questions for get-

ting reader-based feedback. You may want to glance through these two chapters as you read this section but you can't really use these questions till you have a piece of your own writing in hand to which you want responses and a reader or two willing to give you feedback.

- In Chapter 24, "Options for Getting Feedback," I explain the many possible procedures you might use. At the end of the chapter, I describe one particular way that is especially valuable: getting feedback regularly in a writing support group.

Criterion-Based Feedback and Reader-Based Feedback

Criterion-based feedback helps you find out how your writing measures up to certain criteria—in this case to those criteria most often used in judging expository or nonfiction writing. To get criterion-based feedback you ask readers four broad, fundamental questions:

- a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?
- b. How well is the writing organized?
- c. How effective is the language?
- d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices in usage?

But because these questions are so broad, you usually get better feedback if you ask much more specific questions such as these: Is the basic idea a good one? Is it supported with logical reasoning or valid argument? Are there too many abstractions and too few examples or concrete details? Is the whole thing unified rather than pulling in two or three conflicting directions? Are the sentences clear and readable? Chapter 22 contains twenty-four of these questions grouped under the four general questions listed above.

Reader-based feedback, on the other hand, instead of telling you how your writing measures up to preestablished criteria, tells you what your writing does to particular readers. To get reader-based feedback you ask readers three broad fundamental questions:

- a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?
- b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.
- c. Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with you.

Here too you usually get better feedback by helping your reader out with more specific questions like these: Now that you have finished reading just the first one or two paragraphs or stanzas, are you an interested, cooperative reader or are you bored or resistant in some way? Point to the places where you had the most trouble and describe what kind of trouble it was for you. Summarize your understanding of the whole piece. What mood or voice do you hear in the words? What kind of people does the writer seem to be talking to: people in the know? nincompoops? interested amateurs? How is the writer giving it to you: willingly? slyly? grudgingly? hitting you over the head with it? The next-to-last chapter in this section, 23, contains forty-one of these specific questions grouped under the three general questions above.

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Criterion-based feedback, then, tells you how your writing measures up, reader-based feedback tells you what it does to readers. What is its quality? vs. How does it work? But the distinction between the two can sometimes, in practice, seem fuzzy. That is, sometimes when a reader gives you a piece of criterion-based feedback (for example, "This piece isn't unified"), it may just be his way of saying what was happening inside him ("I felt a bit in the fog most of the time I was reading—I didn't know where I was going"). Or if a reader gives you a piece of reader-based feedback ("When I got here, I stopped short and said, No sir! I won't buy that for one minute!"), it may just be his way of saying "Your logic is faulty here." Indeed, a reader cannot possibly give you a piece of criterion-based feedback except on the basis of something having happened inside him; nor can a reader give you a piece of reader-based feedback without at least implying a criterion of judgment or perception.

But that interdependence between the two kinds of feedback does not diminish the important difference between them. It will make a practical difference to you whether you ask readers for one or the other.*

*This reminds me of arguments about the relationship between form and content. Some people want to say there is no meaningful distinction between form and content because each can, in the last analysis, be expressed in terms of the other. But though that may be theoretically true, the distinction is still a real one that has immense practical importance. If you look for form you will notice things you miss if you look for content, and vice versa.

Thus if a reader tells you "This piece lacks unity," you can surmise that something happened inside him, but you don't really know *what* happened. Perhaps he felt foggy and lost, as I interpreted above, but perhaps he knew perfectly well where the writing was going, but he saw extraneous matter in it that didn't belong. Did it annoy him or did it just violate his sense of unity? Did he feel mosquitoes continually distracting his attention or just notice with calm disapproval the toys scattered on the floor? His comment on your lack of unity tells you nothing of how he experienced your words.

Conversely, if a reader gives you reader-based feedback—for example, "I felt lost here," he's giving you information about his reaction but not much about the writing: Is he lost because of your logic? your wording? Or do you have so many details here that he can no longer follow the main point?

So if you want messages about the writing you should ask for criterion-based feedback, and if you want to know what happened in the reader you should ask for reader-based feedback. That would seem to indicate that you should always ask for criterion-based feedback since it is writing you are trying to work on, not psychology.

But the crucial question about any piece of writing intended for an audience is not "How does it measure up against certain criteria" such as good sentences, good logic, or good paragraphs, but "*How does it work on readers?*" The quality of the sentences, logic, or paragraphs is irrelevant if the writing does to readers what you want it to do.

So that tips the scales back again to reader-based feedback as more useful. But of course it's not that simple. For even if you know all about what's going on in readers, you also need messages about your writing if you want to fix it or change it in any way. Otherwise you'll be stuck telling your reader, "I *know* you are lost, you've given me a vivid description of your lostness, but what is it in my *writing* that makes you feel lost? Is it my wording? My paragraphing? My logic?"

And so of course you should try for both criterion-based and reader-based feedback. Indeed, each kind of feedback enhances the other. Every time you get some criterion-based feedback, you can encourage the reader to tell you about the reactions he had which gave rise to his statement about unity or paragraphs or

spelling. And every time you get reader-based feedback you can encourage the reader to tell you what it was in the writing that caused these reactions in him—was it the logic, the use of evidence, the diction, or what? Nevertheless each kind of feedback has its own special virtues which make it particularly useful in certain situations.

Virtues of Criterion-based Feedback

- Criterion-based feedback is the kind of feedback most people are accustomed to—what they've usually gotten from teachers—and so it's the kind of feedback that comes most naturally to people's lips when you ask them for feedback. And because I provide such a long list of very specific questions, you can avoid one of the main problems of criterion-based feedback: people not knowing what qualities to look for in the writing or else commenting entirely on the basis of just a few favorite criteria.
- It's the more practical and easier to understand of the two kinds of feedback because it speaks more directly about your writing. You have an easier time figuring out how to improve your writing if someone tells you your piece is not clearly organized than if he tells you he felt vaguely uneasy the whole time he was reading. Thus, it is especially good for revising (rather than for general long-term learning about the effect of your words on audiences).
- Indeed, you can even use these questions to get feedback from *yourself* as you are revising—as a checklist for finding weaknesses in your draft. These questions help you see what you have just written through fresh "outside" eyes—through the grid of external criteria. Reader-based questions, on the other hand, would be hard to answer by yourself.
- Criterion-based feedback helps you isolate particularly troublesome aspects of your writing and then concentrate on them in revising and in future writing. For example, perhaps you have trouble getting rid of digressions or making clear transitions between sections. Once you learn this through criterion-based feedback, you can check each piece of writing yourself for these particular dangers. And you can ask readers specifically for feedback on these matters which they might otherwise neglect.
- Thus you can use criterion-based feedback more quickly if you

want to: just zoom in and inquire about a couple of areas and stop. It's hard to get reader-based feedback quickly.

- If you have only one reader for feedback, criterion-based questions will help him pay attention to a broad range of qualities in the writing—noticing things he might neglect if he just reacted naturally. Perhaps he mostly reacts to the kind of person or tone of voice he feels in the writing and neglects organization and logic altogether. Or perhaps he reacts almost entirely to logic and evidence but ignores tone of voice.

- Criterion-based feedback is good for readers who are insensitive to nuances or who are reluctant to talk about their own reactions.

- Criterion-based feedback is more verifiable than reader-based feedback. If a reader says your logic or spelling is wrong you can verify his judgment. If a reader says your organization or paragraphing is weak, you cannot verify his judgment, of course, but if you get three or four intelligent readers to give you their judgments too—and give you their reasons and discuss the question among themselves—you probably can reach a trustworthy objective conclusion.

- Criterion-based feedback is good if you want to work on your conscious understanding of the criteria used in judging writing. It helps you have brief and instructive discussions on the order of “What makes a good introduction?” or “Well, what *does* make a paragraph hang together?” It leads to discussions of conscious craft in writing.

- Criterion-based feedback is useful for readers who must comment on *many* pieces of writing in one sitting or in a comparatively short period of time. That's why teachers tend to use it. It's nearly impossible to read a whole stack of papers in one sitting and react to each one fully, for itself, and on its own terms. It's much easier—and perhaps even fairer in the long run—to choose a manageable set of good criteria and apply them to each paper as you read it.

Thus if I must read and comment on a large stack of essays in one evening I will tend to read each one in terms of criteria such as unity, argument, clarity of language, mechanics, and how well they fit the audience/purpose. I will also try to include something about how it felt to read this essay, but if I am too tired or bored or worried about something else, I may not have any feelings other

than the ones that are intruding on me from the rest of my life—boredom or irritation or impatience. Criterion-based feedback has the enormous virtue of permitting you to read with less than full attention and still—if you are practiced—give accurate feedback on specific criteria.

- If, in particular, your task is to *judge* or *rank* a set of writings—if, for example, you must choose among ten job applications or if you are on a committee to choose the best essay or poem for a competition—you can probably be more fair and accurate if you judge in terms of explicit criteria. Otherwise it's often a matter of judging apples against oranges—just a matter of each piece producing noncomparable reactions in readers. And if you *feel* one piece is clearly best, that feeling may be based entirely on one criterion that you especially value—for example clarity of language or the personal qualities that show through—and you may be neglecting seven other important criteria that are well achieved in some other piece of writing that happens to leave you cold.

- And so if you are writing something for a reader who will judge the writing according to criteria—perhaps for a teacher who will read and evaluate a large stack of essays in one sitting—criterion-based feedback may be especially helpful to you in revising your piece. You can try to find out what criteria he will use. Many requests or guidelines for writing tell you the criteria readers will use, for example, guidelines for a grant application or a letter of recommendation (“Applications will be judged on the basis of . . .”). It's worth asking a teacher to tell you about the criteria he uses in grading, even if he doesn't use them with complete consistency. But it's important to remember that people often judge on the basis of different criteria from the ones they think they are using.

Virtues of Reader-based Feedback

Despite all those strengths of criterion-based feedback, I find reader-based feedback even more useful. If you neglect reader-based feedback, you will miss many of the main advantages and pleasures of the whole feedback process.

- Reader-based feedback gives you the main thing you need to improve your writing: the experience of what it felt like for readers as they were reading your words. In the long run you get more out

of taking a ride inside your reader's skin than you get from a precise diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of your writing. That precise diagnosis can be surprisingly useless in actually helping you to *change* the way you write. It may even paralyze you.

Besides, readers often hide their own reactions behind criterion-based judgments about, say, paragraphs, the digressions, the diction. They don't feel comfortable saying, "I was bored after the first couple of pages" or "Actually I sort of felt you were badgering me and talking down to me" or "Somehow I found myself disagreeing with you more at the end than I had at the beginning but I didn't know why."

People are nervous about saying these things because they can't explain or justify them. Yet such felt reactions are often just what you need for improving your writing, especially if you can get the reader to tell you a bit more about where and why they arose.

• Reader-based feedback is the most trustworthy feedback because you are only asking for "raw data"—what they saw and what was happening to them as they read. With criterion-based feedback, on the other hand, you are asking them to *translate* those perceptions and reactions into a judgment about what is good or bad in the writing. That act of translation is tricky. It takes an experienced reader to translate his discomfort or annoyance into an accurate statement of what's wrong with your logic or diction. He may tell you "too many digressions," for example, or "too many generalizations," but perhaps the essential thing is that you didn't get him to be a cooperative reader. If you had, he wouldn't have complained about the digressions, indeed he would have seen them as integral to your argument. And even if you fix the digressions, he'll probably stay irritated and uncooperative and find something else to complain about. And all the while, you never learn the essential point: some tone or stance in your writing made him irritated and uncooperative. If, on the other hand, you can *enter into* his reactions and *feel* his irritation in those very words which you thought were perfectly straightforward and well-mannered—if you can learn to experience your words as he experiences them—you can usually find a way to translate all that into practical action: you can decide whether a change is needed (or whether his reaction was peculiar) and what kind of change will fix that irritation.

• Therefore, reader-based feedback has the advantage of keep-

ing you more in charge of the whole feedback process. Readers get to tell you what they saw and what happened in them, but *you* take over from there. You do all the translating. You get to decide what their reactions mean and what changes if any you want to make. One of the main reasons so many people hate feedback or fail to learn from it is that it makes them feel so helpless. Getting feedback has always felt like putting themselves entirely into someone else's power. You don't do that if you use reader-based feedback. (Of course, there *are* times when you are busy and tired and have great faith in your reader, so you say, "Don't bother me with your reactions, just tell me what's wrong and how to fix it.")

• Reader-based feedback has the enormous virtue of being available from *anyone*. You don't need experts or experienced writers. Teachers and editors have no special headstart. You can even read pieces out loud to people who can't read, and you will be surprised at what excellent feedback you get. You can use friends, children, people you like to work with, whoever is available, people who know lots about the topic but nothing about writing. The quality of their feedback has nothing to do with their ideas or theories about writing. In short, it is much easier to give good reader-based feedback than to give good criterion-based feedback. And more fun.

• If you are writing an audience-oriented piece such as a memo or a tricky letter—writing that must *work* on your intended reader rather than be good in some timeless or abstract fashion—reader-based feedback will be more helpful to you. Not only will it tell you a lot about how your words work on a real person, you can go out and get feedback from readers *just like* your intended reader—even if they are inexperienced or uninterested in writing. If you are writing children's stories, you can't ask children about the unity or diction in what you read to them, but you can ask them lots of these reader-based questions about what happened to them. If you are writing advertisements meant to work on small business owners, you *could* ask them about diction or digressions, but that's not the point. The point is what happens to them.

• Because reader-based feedback emphasizes the practical question of what the words are doing rather than the theoretical question of how good they are, it is less evaluative and judgmental. It usually leads to more listening and learning, less arguing. Criterion-based feedback, on the other hand, is based entirely on ideals or perfect models and so every item of that feedback is likely

to be a statement of how your words didn't quite measure up. It's hard not to be defensive and to argue against it: "Well, you may not *think* that's a proper introduction, but you just have a rigid, simpleminded notion of what an opening paragraph ought to be like." With reader-based feedback there is seldom anything to argue about. You can't say, "I disagree. You were *not* confused during that opening paragraph." And even if you think he was stupid to be confused, your act of simply listening and seeing it through his eyes will probably lead you to improve that first paragraph.

The main thing people feel when they first learn to get reader-based feedback is an enormous sense of relief that value judgments and "measuring-up" are not the focus of every statement. It's an exhilarating experience when, as sometimes happens, you get a rich set of reactions to a piece of your writing—you are getting good insights and taking notes like mad as you listen to this person tell you his reactions—and then it is all over and you start to listen to the next person give you feedback and suddenly it hits you: "Hey! I don't even know whether he *liked* it or not." Suddenly that tyrannical matter of liking and not-liking pales into its not-very-significant place.

Of course you often do get value judgments in reader-based feedback since liking or not liking is likely to be one of the events in the reader. But it's only one of the events and usually not the most important one. And it's easier to accept a value judgment and learn from it when it consists of a statement of how the reader is bothered or put off or made uncomfortable by your words than when it consists of a statement of how your writing doesn't measure up to some criterion.

- In this sense, then, reader-based feedback is the most *efficient* kind of feedback: it can lead to the fastest and most pervasive improvement. It is more apt to speak to the root causes of strength and weakness in your writing, not just the surface effects. That is, if you ask for reader-based feedback you are apt to hear things like this: "Damn it, stop beating around the bush and come out and say what's on your mind. Stop working so hard at fending off my possible disagreements. Just write what you have to say. Your constant defending is making it harder for me as a reader just to follow your thoughts comfortably, in fact it's making me angry." Think how much more useful it is to hear that than to hear someone say "It's

too long and wordy, too many dependent clauses, try for simpler syntax and a clearer progression of logic." Once a reader helps you hear a note of insecure beating around the bush in your own writing voice, you can strengthen your writing much more quickly and pervasively than if he just told you to get rid of dependent clauses and use simpler diction and better logic.

Reader-based feedback gives you someone saying "I get annoyed and don't take your argument seriously because I always hear a kind of whine in your voice," instead of someone saying "too many passive verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Not enough crisp verbs of action. Your diction isn't lively or energetic." (I'm not saying you can get rid of a habit of voice overnight once you hear it. Since it is a habit it will slip out again and again in speaking and freewriting. Indeed, now that you realize a whine is there you ought to invite it out as much as you can in freewriting—to exaggerate it, play with it, get a better feeling for it, and see what it is trying to tell you. This will improve your ability to *remove* it when you revise—and gradually to grow out of it.)

Reader-based feedback gives you someone saying, "I get mad at you when I read this because I feel you being arrogant and snotty. You just ski as fast as you can and you don't give a damn whether I fall down or not as I try to follow you. You never even look back." Most of the time that kind of reaction helps you more than "Too many abrupt changes, too few clear transitions, too many abstractions without illustration, and even when you do give illustrations they are not obvious ones." I'm not saying that the reader is always *correct* in his picture of you. Even though he is intimidated by you, you may not in fact be writing in an arrogant or snotty way, just having a good time enjoying your own powers—skiing fast because you have fun skiing fast. But you can often improve your writing more quickly and easily when you realize how it *feels* to a reader, even if that reader is making an incorrect judgment about you, than if you were given entirely correct statements about your syntax or paragraph transitions.

- Reader-based feedback is especially necessary for poetry, fiction, and other kinds of creative writing. There are so many different ways in which poems or stories can succeed—or fail—that it's impossible to spell out a list of specific criteria for them. Indeed I am nervous about having you depend too much on my list of criterion-based questions even for nonfiction or expository writ-

ing. It's a safe list. Most teachers would agree with most items. But many successful pieces of nonfiction *fail* to meet some of these criteria, for example, they digress or they are hard to read or they have peculiar paragraphing. And many unsuccessful pieces measure up well on most criteria, but fail to have that certain something that makes them succeed with readers.

Summary

I can summarize the complementary virtues of the two kinds of feedback by pointing out that criterion-based feedback forces criteria to be conscious and reader-based feedback allows criteria to remain unconscious. Conscious criteria help readers notice things they would miss if they just gave themselves over to natural or habitual reading. But these conscious criteria can also be a screen between readers and your words—a filter which keeps readers from contacting and experiencing your words directly—leading them instead just to compare your words to a model, hold them up against a template, check off categories on a list. Amateur readers, in particular, sometimes go into a peculiar gear when you ask them for criterion-based feedback. They don't just read the way they would normally read. They say to themselves, "Well, now I've got to give help on writing, let's see, I've got to be on the lookout for faults, now let's see what should I look for, good organization, spelling and grammar of course, that's important, paragraphing, yes, that's what my teachers stressed a lot. Tone. I had this terrific teacher who talked about tone all the time, but I never did figure out what he meant. And not too many adjectives; not too many long sentences." Readers can't tell you much about your writing when they have all that noise in their heads.

Reader-based feedback, on the other hand, by allowing criteria to remain unconscious, yields just the opposite virtues and defects. It allows readers just to relax and read your writing for enlightenment or pleasure, and to experience it on its own terms. It allows them to notice and react to more qualities in it than they could consciously analyze, and it allows them to be more sensitive to nuances—especially matters of tone and presentation of self that are difficult to categorize but often determine success or failure. Leaving criteria unconscious, however, can also permit narrow reading: reading that is a slave to one or two unconscious criteria—

for example, how a reader feels about the tone of voice or the "vibes."

In short, the two kinds of feedback encourage readers to take different roles. When you ask a reader to give you criterion-based feedback you encourage him to function like an expert, a coach, or a commentator, that is, to stand off to the side and watch you from the stage wings as you give your violin concert and not get too involved in your music. This helps him to tell you about your technique. When you ask your reader to give you reader-based feedback, on the other hand, you encourage him to function like an audience, that is, to sit right out there in front of you and experience your music. This helps him to tell you about what your music does to the audience.

The moral of the story, then, is to use both kinds of feedback. I present criterion-based feedback first here because it is more familiar and easier to understand, but generally you do better to ask for reader-based feedback first. That way readers can just read for pleasure or enlightenment and tell you about whatever happens to them when they read in their accustomed way—before you make them into more self-conscious and technique-oriented readers by asking them criterion-based questions.

A Catalogue of Criterion-Based Questions

The twenty-odd questions in this chapter will help you find out about four basic qualities in a piece of writing.

- a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?
- b. How well is the writing organized?
- c. How effective is the language?
- d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices in usage?

These four criteria can be fruitfully applied to any kind of writing but most of the specific questions in this chapter are framed so that they fit expository or nonfiction writing better than poetry or fiction. The questions which follow are too many to ask any one reader on one occasion (although you could ask *yourself* all these questions if you were revising one of your own pieces as carefully as you could). As in the rest of the book, I am trying to help you take charge of things by giving you more recipes than you can use for one meal. Try out these questions on different pieces of your writing and on different readers so you gradually learn which ones are most useful for you and which ones will be most important under various circumstances.

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a. *What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?*

1. Is the basic idea or insight a good one?
2. Is it supported by logical reasoning or valid argument?

3. Is it supported by evidence and examples?
4. Is it really saying something or is it just a collection of thoughts or observations (however unified and well written) sitting there limply? Did the writer communicate why this whole thing matters?
5. Is there too much abstraction or generalization? So few details, examples, and explanations that it ends up dull, empty, impossible to experience? or perhaps even impossible to understand?
6. Is there too *little* abstraction and too much clutter of detail? Too little standing back for perspective? Too little forest per tree?
7. Does it do what it says or implies it is going to do? Does it satisfy the issues it raises?
8. Is there a point of view or is the writing just disembodied statements from nowhere? And is that point of view unified and consistent?
9. Is the piece fitted to its audience? Has the writer understood their needs and point of view?

b. *How well is the writing organized?*

10. Is the whole thing unified? Is there one central idea to which everything pertains? Or is it pulling in two or three directions or full of loose ends and digressions?
11. Are the parts arranged in a coherent or logical sequence?
12. Is there a beginning? That is, does it start off in a way that allows you to get comfortably started? (The safest and most common way of doing this is to give an introduction—for example, a quick explanation of what's to come. But of course that's not the only way. Indeed plunging the reader into the middle of things without warning *can* function as a good beginning.)
13. Is there a middle? A body, some girth or solidity, some sense of meat and potatoes, sufficiency? Or does it turn around and say good-bye almost as soon as it is finished saying hello?
14. Is there an ending? Does it give you a sense of closure or completion? (The safest and most common method of doing this is to end with a conclusion—not just repeating what went before but figuring out what everything means or adds up to. But again, that's not the only good way to end a piece.)
15. Were the paragraphs really paragraphs? Could you tell what each one was saying? Did they function as helpful and comfortable

units of thought: not too much to carry in your arms, but not so little that it feels like a wasted trip?

c. How effective is the language?

16. Are the sentences clear and readable?
17. Are the words used correctly?
18. Is it succinct enough for the purpose and audience? Not too long, repetitious, dull?
19. Is it full enough? Or does the writer squeeze out so much of the juice of human communication, the oil of actual spoken discourse, that the language, even if correct, is indigestible?
20. Does the diction, mood, or level of formality fit the audience and occasion?
21. Is the language alive, human, interesting? Either because of interesting metaphors or turns of phrase; or because of a voice or presence in the words—a sense of someone's actually being there?

d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices of usage?

22. Are there mistakes in grammar, usage, spelling and typing?
23. Are there mistakes in footnotes, graphs, or other special effects?
24. Is it neat and easy to read on the page?

A Catalogue of Reader-Based Questions

The forty-one questions in this chapter are just specific practical ways to ask your reader three broad questions about how your words affected him:

- a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?
- b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.
- c. make some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with readers.

Sometimes a reader can tell us without difficulty or hesitation exactly what was going on in him as he read our words—either because he was surprised by his reactions or because he was in a particularly meditative, self-reflective mood. But often it is difficult for readers to tell in any detail what was happening to them as they read. Nor is this necessarily a fault. One of the marks of good reading is wholehearted investment in the words and meanings and no attention to the self. If a reader can remember nothing at all about what was happening as he read your words that may be a sign of total success.

But as writers we need to know what was going on in our readers. It would pay us, if we could, to hook up little cameras in all the corners of readers' innards so we could see all the thoughts, images, feelings, and impulses that occur as they read our writing. I like to call reader-based feedback *movies of a reader's mind*.

Get a reader to answer enough of the following questions and

you will get those movies. Being inside his skin as he reads your words is the most valuable experience you can get as a writer. It is valuable for readers, too. They not only discover more than they knew about this particular piece of writing, they also learn to be much more perceptive readers.

Remember, however, that these questions—and I give a formidable number of them—are nothing but ways to help readers tell you how they experience your writing. Some readers will give you good feedback without your asking them any of these questions at all. You can just sit back and listen.

a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?

Stop reading after you have read only one or two paragraphs or stanzas.*

1. What was happening to you as you read this opening passage?
2. Tell which words or phrases struck you most or stuck out or had resonance.
3. What has this section just said? What do you now expect the whole piece to say? (In the case of a story: what happened and what are the implications? What do you expect in what follows?)
4. What ideas or beliefs or feelings do you bring to this piece that could influence the way you read it?
5. The writer has just, as it were, introduced himself to you. How did he do it? Formally? Casually? Intimately? Jocularly? Did he thrust out his hand for you to shake? Sidle up to you without looking at you? What sense of the writer do you have now—on the basis of this limited introduction?

* You may be reluctant to ask for feedback from a reader who has only read a little bit of your piece. You may feel you'll get nothing but unfounded snap judgments. But first impressions often influence how a reader reacts to the rest of your piece. If you wait for feedback till your reader has finished reading your whole piece you may not learn how your opening section really affected him. You may not learn, for example, that the real reason for his quarrelling with your argument or his failure to experience the main event in your story was because he got irritated at the very start and consequently read the remainder in a resistant, foot-dragging mood. If he had been a cooperative reader he might not have had any of those difficulties. Whether a reader is going to be with you or against you often gets decided in this opening section.

6. At this early stage, are you more *with* the writer or *against* him? dragging your feet or helping pedal?

7. What do you want, need, wish for now? If you are fighting the writer now, what would it take to get you pedaling?

8. Continue reading. If you have a copy in your hand, make light pencil marks to give a fuller record of how you are reacting to the words: put a straight line next to passages and underneath words and phrases that work or please you; a wiggly line in the same way for parts which don't work or bother you in some way.

Stop once again—half or three-quarters through the piece.*

9. What has been happening to you and what is happening to you now? Tell it in the form of a story: first this happened, then I noticed that, then I felt this, and so on. For example:

First I was open and sympathetic to what I thought you were up to. But then without noticing I drifted into resisting what you've been saying. Something made me feel "Wait a minute! There are things that don't fit!" Somehow I became an adversary, you became my enemy. But now that I stop and think about it, basically I agree with you completely. The trouble is you seem so wide-eyed and innocent and naïve—as though you are always saying "gee, gosh, golly, isn't this idea wonderful and amazing." I want to attack this naïve childish tone. And yet your main assertion is something I agree with. I guess it makes me mad to have my wise sophisticated point of view look silly and naïve.

Make sure to tell everything. Even if it seems irrelevant. If you started daydreaming or thinking about your new shoes, that's feedback. The important thing is to tell the writer where you were in his writing when it happened. All feedback is mixed with subjectivity. Let the writer do the sorting.

10. What changes have occurred in you since before? If you

* It's true that you affect the reader's reactions somewhat by stopping him in mid-course and asking him questions. It probably makes him a bit more thoughtful and observant than if he just read through without pause. He will understand some subtleties—and perhaps also notice some ragged edges—that he might otherwise have missed. You may want to ask some readers to read straight through before giving you any feedback at all. But these interim responses solve the most frustrating problem of reader-based feedback, the problem of vaguely global reactions such as "It was pretty good. I liked it a lot." By stopping your reader in the middle you force him to tell you where he is in an unfinished sequence of reactions and thus to talk about your writing as a series of events occurring in time inside a reader's head—which is what any piece of writing is—not as a vague global thingified "it."

were *with* the writer earlier and now resist or doubt him, where did you start to part company? (Or vice versa.) Why? What would the writer have to do to get you back?

11. Point to the sentences or passages you liked especially. Point to the ones you didn't understand or which made you stumble or resist.

12. What do you expect next? What do you need before it ends?

Stop right after you have completed reading it all.

13. What is happening to you now? Changes in reaction or loyalty? What's the most important thing about the piece?

14. How would you instinctively *reply* or *respond* if you weren't trying to give feedback? Would you tell the writer something similar that happened to you? Ask him what was going on in his mind when he wrote? Quarrel with him? Ask for clarification on some issue? Ask: "Did that *really* happen to you?" Ask: "But then what happened after the funeral?" Comment on the meaning of the story? Ask something about technique, such as "What made you decide to start with the shooting instead of the quarrel?" Ask him out for coffee and seek to know him better?*

15. Describe the way the writer ended his piece. Describe it as though he were ending a letter, saying good-bye, ending a telephone conversation: Did he hang up abruptly? Stand around on the doorstep unable to finish his sentence and say good-bye? A sudden gush of warmth? Did he slip out without anyone noticing?

16. Which aspects of *you* does the piece bring out? Your contemplative side? Your childish curiosity or eagerness? Your motherly or fatherly helpfulness ("Let's see how I can help out this nice young writer")?

17. What kind of person has the writer turned out to be? How did he turn out differently from what you had first suspected?

18. What do you like about the piece at this point?

Remain silent and reflective for a few moments.

19. What is happening to you? What delayed reactions or second thoughts do you have? Which parts of the writing seem to have been written in invisible ink and to emerge only slowly as you hold it over a candle? For example,

* You may not have to *ask* readers this question. Just notice how they act and what they ask you when they finish reading. Don't get sucked into responding to what they say. Listen to it as feedback.

It's been obvious to me throughout that I disagree with you entirely. But it's only now dawning on me gradually that I haven't been *fighting* you very much. Somehow you manage to give me your meanings as wholly yours. You don't make me feel I have to agree or accept them—or even find them rational. I can be interested and curious from a safe distance. In fact I find my impulse is to come slightly *forward* toward you—not retreat or push you away—because you are giving me a chance to look safely at something I usually fight and push away. It's kind of a relief.

Now read the piece of writing again.

20. Tell the differences between what happens to you on this reading and what happened to you on the first reading.

*b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened.**

21. Summarize it. If you have difficulty, pretend you only have thirty seconds to tell a friend what this piece is saying. Tell him quickly and informally. You don't have time to get it right or prepare an answer because the train is just getting to his stop. Let the writer hear you fumbling to find the center of gravity. For example, "Well, it's about a trip in the mountains. Or perhaps it's about survival. I guess it's really about the difference between men and women." Then summarize it in a sentence. Then in one word: first a word from the text, then a word not in the text.

22. Summarize what you feel the writer is *trying* but not quite

* You may have to push readers to give you summarizing feedback. They often resist it because it feels too simpleminded, too mechanical, too much like they are being given a sixth grade test. It's worth insisting on a summary, however, because without it you may misunderstand everything else you hear. Imagine hearing your reader say "I found your argument irritating and I especially wanted to quarrel with you in the third paragraph and in your conclusion"—and doing your best to stand inside his shoes and find the irritating quality in your words—and all the while not realizing he thought you were saying something entirely different from what you thought you were saying.

Even if you have a poem or story, it's worth getting readers to summarize it; even to summarize the "moral" of the story or "meaning" of the poem. Many readers who consider themselves artistic will scorn to summarize a poem—feeling it is a lowbrow thing to do. But you need to know how your writing has settled or sorted itself out or come to a focus in their heads. You have to give them permission to do what feels crude or imprecise—permission to "do violence" to what you have written. Words won't get into anyone's head without a little twisting. You need to know the nature of the twisting that has occurred.

managing to say. Where is the writing trying to go—perhaps against the writer's will?

23. Summarize what you *wish* it were saying.

24. Give an exaggerated summary. How would you summarize it if you were making fun of it or making a parody of it.*

25. Negative summary. What is it *not* about? What is the opposite of what it is saying? What is it almost saying or refraining from saying?†

c. *Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with readers.‡*

26. What other pieces of writing does it remind you of? What *forms* of writing does it remind you of: a love letter? a federal interdepartmental memo? a "why-I-want-to-go-to-college" essay on an application form? a late night diary entry?

27. Tell how someone different from you might react. "If my *mother* read this, she would think it was silly and not very funny." "If John read this, he wouldn't have a *clue* what you were talking

* Don't ask for exaggerated summaries if you feel shaky about this piece or generally vulnerable about your writing. They can sting. But they improve the feedback immensely. So many readers beat around the bush and won't come right out and say what they see—they hem and haw and tiptoe around their reactions and they are so afraid of hurting your feelings that you can't even tell what they are saying. They just fill the air with smoke. But when you tell them to *exaggerate* or *make fun of it*, this clears the air and they can just *say* it, *plop* it right down on the table.

And when you get an exaggerated summary you find out how your words will probably be understood by readers who don't read carefully or sympathetically. I got the following parody summary of my earlier book about writing: "Writing is easy. You never have to try, it's never painful, just sit down and write whatever comes to mind and it will always come out just right." It makes me wince. I want to say, "Wait, wait, you made a mistake in your reading," but it's a perfect picture of how the book was perceived by readers with a strong antipathy to what I was trying to say. It would have been helpful to get that feedback before I finished revising the book.

‡ This sounds odd, but try it on readers and you will sometimes find subtle but important clues about tendencies in your writing and your reader's preconceptions and preoccupations. Sometimes you don't get the benefit of a reader's regular summary (or other feedback) till he gives his version of what your writing is not about or not saying.

‡ Here are some metaphorical questions which will help readers tell you reactions and perceptions they cannot easily express literally, and even some reactions they were not conscious of. Don't push readers too hard to explain or interpret these images. That will hinder them from giving you good ones. Just listen and trust that you will benefit from them even if you cannot understand them or translate them into advice.

about, he'd think you were just describing a dream." "If I were a man, I would feel attacked."*

28. Make up an image for the relationship between the writer and reader. Does the writer seem to have his arm draped familiarly over your shoulder? Is the writer shouting from a cliff to a crowd below? Reading to you from a stage? Sending a letter bomb? Speaking as daddy to his family from the head of the dining room table? Shaking his fist at you?

29. What do you feel the writer is trying to do to you? Beat you over the head? Trap you? Trick you? Surprise you? Make you like him?

30. Is the writer *giving* it? How? On a silver platter? Reverently for your worship—but only from a distance? Laughingly? Is he holding back? Is he giving it and taking it back—coyly giving you glimpses and closing the curtain again? Is he slyly trying to keep his meaning a bit hidden so only the right sort of people will get it—wearing sloppy clothes with hidden signs of taste so that only special people will know that he's special too?

31. Describe the writer's relationship to the reader in terms of *distance*. Close? At arm's length? Distant? Describe *changes* in distance that occur. For example, "I feel the writer backing off toward the end—clamming up, becoming a bit distant or formal—as though he is suddenly embarrassed or awkward at realizing how much of himself he revealed."

32. Find words or metaphors for the *voice* or *tone* in the writing: intimate? shouting? coy? tight-lipped? "I feel the writer being all cheery and jocular but really not letting himself show at all; the joking tone feels like a way of hiding or of not taking his own message seriously. Joe Jokester." Or "I can feel the writer's shyness and self-consciousness coming through the words like a cloud of fog. It's as though he is on stage giving a speech and because he is so nervous he makes *me* feel vicariously nervous. I want to say, 'Forget about us and just concentrate on what you are saying.' " Describe the voice in metaphors of color; of weather (foggy here, sunny there). You can describe voice by comparison, too; for example, like Jack Benny? Kissinger? Edith Bunker? Try not to be

* This can be very useful feedback taken at face value—clues to the reactions of different readers. But sometimes an element of make-believe or role-playing permits readers to express some of their own reactions which they weren't aware of or couldn't express.

influenced too much by the way he actually read his words out loud. Perhaps he read them shyly, but there is a domineering voice in the writing itself.

33. Look especially for changes in voice. Perhaps it starts out all stiff, but then loosens up. Where do you see that change? Perhaps it takes on another coloration for the conclusion, for saying good-bye.

34. Try conveying the voice or tone by mimicking it—probably with exaggeration. For example, “Look, buddy, I’m in the know. I’ve seen it all, I’m a tough guy, you can’t fool me.” My tone in *Writing Without Teachers* was mimicked in this way: “I’m *really* sincere. You can really believe me. I know just how you feel. I’m a good guy. I wouldn’t steer you wrong. Only, don’t get mad at me if it doesn’t work. I’m really trying as hard as I can. Besides, I’m having a hard time with my writing too.”

35. Do you feel a difference between the voice created or implied by these words and the actual writer who wrote them? If you know the writer personally you may hear the difference immediately and vividly: “How come you sound so pompous here when you never talk that way?” But even if you don’t know the writer at all, you can still sometimes feel a gap of some sort between the voice *in* the words and the writer *behind* the words—as though the writer is playing some kind of game or being slippery or ironic in the voice he uses. If you can feel this kind of difference, describe it in terms of tone of voice, appearance, personality, whatever. For example, “Behind the sweet and reasonable voice in this essay I sense someone who is actually angry.” Make up an image or metaphor for how these two people are relating to each other. (In the D. H. Lawrence passage I cite in Chapter 25 on voice, for example, I feel the author smiling in a somewhat sly and sophisticated way at the ranting and raving voice who speaks the essays.) How do they feel about each other? What would they say to each other if they spoke?

36. What images of the writer come to mind? Hunched over a desk? Sprawled on a divan? Sitting on a beach? How does the writer dress? Hold his body? Wear his hair? Let all images just be intuitive, uncalculated.

37. Use camera metaphors for how the writer handles his material. Where does he move in close, where fade back? Where is it

sharp or fuzzy? What is foreground and background? Is he using special effects or gimmicks? Do they work for you?

38. Whom does the writing seem to address? Strangers? An old friend? Dumbells? Prissy girls? Tough guys? Is it talking *up* or *down*?

39. Describe the punctuation or rhythms (or indeed any tendency in the writing) in terms of a transaction between writer and reader. My wife was once telling me about how I had too many semicolons. I was resisting her advice stoutly, but then she drifted into an image: she felt me trying to keep her, as reader, on a leash, keep her attention on a tight rein, never let her look away from the writing or take a deep breath or relax for a moment—as though I were insecure and afraid to give readers a full stop for fear they would drift off and not come back and pay attention to me. It made her feel continually tugged at. Suddenly I could feel what she was talking about and I had to stop arguing about the rules for legal semicolons and start listening.

40. Try other media. Made a doodle or a picture or a bunch of sounds or a body improvisation to represent the writing or your reaction to the writing.

41. As an alternative to answering any of these specific questions, try just reading the piece and then doing five or ten minutes of fast nonstop writing. You’ll find that what you scribble down usually tells a lot about how you experienced the piece. This is a particularly useful procedure when you have gotten used to giving reader-based feedback.

Language Diversity

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